

PEDIATRIC ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH SPECIALTY UNITS

WHAT IS THE PUBLIC HEALTH PROBLEM?

- Thousands of unplanned environmental releases of toxins occur each year.
- More than 1,500 uncontrolled hazardous-waste sites are on the National Priorities List (NPL) and are targeted for clean-up by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.
- In the United States, one in four children live within 4 miles of a hazardous waste site and are at greater risk of exposure to environmental contamination.

WHAT HAS ATSDR ACCOMPLISHED?

In 1998, the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) joined with the Association of Occupational and Environmental Clinics (AOEC) to develop the Pediatric Environmental Health Specialty Unit (PEHSU) program. The PEHSUs are also supported by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The program serves as a national resource for pediatricians, other health care providers, and communities. The program is designed to:

- reduce environmental health threats to children;
- improve access to expertise in pediatric environmental medicine; and
- strengthen public health prevention capacity.

The key focus areas of the units are medical education and training, clinical consultation, and clinical specialty referrals for children who may have been exposed to hazardous substances in the environment. Health care providers specifically trained in both pediatrics and environmental medicine are available on a case-by-case basis to provide services to children and their families and to provide professionals with training and information on childhood environmental health issues. In several cities, the PEHSUs are affiliated with poison control centers, which are a resource for parents whose children have been exposed to toxic substances. During fiscal year 2002, the PEHSU staff have clinically evaluated more than 1,550 children, conducted more than 29,700 telephone consultations, and provided education and training activities to more than 23,000 health care and public health professionals.

WHAT ARE THE NEXT STEPS?

Public use and demand for the PEHSU services has consistently increased since the PEHSU program's inception. Currently, 11 PEHSU clinics are operating in the United States; at least one is located in each of the DHHS regions. ATSDR is working with health-care and medical officials in both Canada and Mexico to provide guidance on the development of PEHSU-type centers in those countries that also would be accessible to border communities in each country. In addition, ATSDR is exploring opportunities for the PEHSUs to collaborate with the Centers for Children's Environmental Health and Disease Prevention Research, a joint project of EPA, the National Institute for Environmental Health Sciences, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

For additional information on this and other CDC and ATSDR programs, visit www.cdc.gov/programs.

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